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Fear, Fury and Feminism: Finding a Way to Peace in the Israeli/Palestinian Conflict

By:

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Introduction

I was introduced to the Scholar and the Feminist in the 1970s when I joined MF-2, one of more than five Marxist-Feminist study and consciousness-raising groups in New York City. In those days, when the Scholar and the Feminist was the only show in town, you had to return your registration the minute you received it in the mail, or you would be closed out of the conference. Forget registering at the door. Since then the Scholar and the Feminist has been on my regular Spring calendar. So I was intensely pleased when Janet Jakobsen invited me to do a workshop with Irena Klepfisz in February, 2002. By then I had been doing sociological work on Jews in north America for 30 years, and had been studying Jewish feminists' responses to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict for almost twenty years.

By the time we planned our workshop at the Scholar and the Feminist, Irena Klepfisz, Yiddish/English poet, had published numerous powerful essays, among them on "Anti-Semitism in the Lesbian and Feminist Movement," and on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. In her book, Dreams of an Insomniac: Jewish Feminist Essays, Speeches and Diatribes, especially in her essay "Yom Hashoah, Yom Yerushalayim," she had critically addressed the complexities of relating the Nazi holocaust and the Occupation of the West Bank, Gaza and Jerusalem. And as an activist, she had brought these insights to her organizing for peace in the Middle East.

My own research since 1983 focused on what I called "fallout conflagrations:" the fierce clashes sparked by the Israeli/Palestinian conflict at feminist conferences, activist events, and Jewish family dinner tables. In the turbulent wake of Letty Cottin Pogrebin's famous Ms. Magazine article on "Anti-Semitism in the Women's Movement" (much of which included opposition to Israel among its examples of Anti-Semitism), and in the face of growing movements of Jews critical of Israeli policies toward Palestinians, I was trying to understand Jewish women's diverse perceptions, experiences, and definitions of anti-Semitism in relation to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. I did Oral History interviews with Jewish women involved in a major controversy over a Palestinian woman's speech at an International Women's Day conference.

Fear, Fury and Feminism

The Spring 2002 Scholar and the Feminist conference, called *Public Sentiments: Memory, Trauma, History, Action*, took place in the climate of fear and vengeance sparked by the 9/11 attacks the previous Fall. As we planned our workshop, we called it “Fear, Fury and Feminism: Finding a Way to Peace in the Israeli/Palestinian Conflict.” We wanted to show that [some] feminists had demonstrated that violent revenge was not the only way, and certainly not the preferable way, to react to trauma and the fears and rage piqued by the memory of trauma.

Planning a Workshop in a Time of Terror

Both as scholars, and as feminist peace activists, Irena and I were very familiar with the kind of fear and rage that was regularly sparked by *any* discussion about Israel and Palestine. Innumerable feminist conferences, including the famed Copenhagen conference, had been roiled by the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. For many Jews, the profound sense of vulnerability in an anti-Jewish world leads them to view Israel as an essential oasis for their survival. This deep fear that their very survival is threatened, places any questioning of the dominant paradigm about Israel’s security into an electric force-field of emotional dynamite. It is often difficult for critical Jews to be heard. We are sometimes accused of betrayal: of being “self-hating Jews.” Even many Jews critical of Israeli governmental policies fear that exposure of Israeli brutality toward Palestinians will fuel a ready reservoir of Jew-hatred in the non-Jewish world. And it sometimes does.

So in preparing our workshop for the 2002 Scholar&Feminist, Irena and I had our own fears. And our greatest fear was other women’s fury. We did not want to become hopelessly mired in the familiar vortex of circular debate and recrimination. We did not want to be imprisoned by the rages of the dominant paradigm. Nor did we want to merely “preach to the converted.” We wanted to communicate information about women peace activists.

We anticipated furious reactions. To our surprise the response was appreciation for information on Israeli and Palestinian peacemakers, as participants eagerly grabbed our booklists, pamphlets and internet lists. Several asked to be added to my email forwarding list of information about Israel/Palestine.

Finding a Way to Peace in the Israeli/Palestinian Conflict

In the wake of the attacks on the U.S. Pentagon and the World Trade Center, some commentators insisted that “We’re all Israelis now.” They meant that people in the USA suddenly felt vulnerable, as are Israelis, to terrorism in the form of suicide attacks. This identification was encouraged by American neo-cons and Israeli “hawks,” because it easily fostered support for massive violent reprisal by their military forces. Neve Gordon, former director of Israeli Physicians for Social Responsibility critically analyzed this macabre festival of US and Israeli hawks:

“For Israel, September 11 was a Hanukah miracle,” *Ha’aretz*’s political analyst recently quoted Israeli officials as having said. Thousands of American fatalities are considered –in this cynical world—a godsend because their deaths helped shift international pressure from Israel on to the Palestinians, while allowing the Israeli government to pursue its regional objectives unobstructed. Indeed, ever since September 11 the United States has supported Israel’s actions. (Gordon, in The

Other Israel, p.99)

To bomb Afghanistan, Iraq, or Palestinian villages in revenge for suicide attacks you must assume that the people bombed either had responsibility for those attacks, or supported them, or might support them in the future. Or you must suppose that bombing them will motivate and empower the survivors to restrain potential suicide bombers. Or you must not think about any possible connection between the bombing, the people and the attacks. Or not care. The “Hawks” revenge-militarism wreaks violent collective punishment for acts of violence.

On a visit to the West Bank in 1989 I saw the rubble of house after house, destroyed by the Israeli military because someone from the family –or from the adjacent house– had been arrested on suspicion of violent activity. The families who had lived in the houses now lived in tents nearby, or with relatives, or were scattered.

The hawkish response constitutes Palestinians (in the case of the Israelis) and other Arabs associated –however obliquely-- with the 9/11 attacks (in the case of the USA), as prey, and justifies annihilating them, because it is spawned by the assumption that they are predators. It demonizes them, so that they are not merely individually responsible, but rather are categorically responsible, and therefore may be blithely collectively punished, unto their children and infants and old men and women.

The “Other Israelis,”¹ among them the women’s peace organizations, hold other assumptions, analyses, and values. They refuse to dehumanize Palestinians on strategic, practical, political and moral grounds. They have had more complex experience with Palestinians, and they believe that military strategies of house demolitions, targeted assassinations, even the “security wall” and its associated checkpoints, only increase the demoralization leading to violence, and strengthen those Palestinian forces promoting violence.

We wanted to use our workshop to show that the “hawks” were not the only Israelis; that there was a different Israeli model for responding to suicide attacks. That different Israeli model was the non-violent, courageous, and persistent actions of feminist and non-feminist peace activists such as Women in Black, the Coalition of Israeli and Palestinian Women for a Just Peace, Bat Shalom and The Jerusalem Link, Machsom Watch, the Fifth Mother, New Profile, Gush Shalom, Rabbis for Human Rights, the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, and Physicians for Social Responsibility. We distributed materials and gave descriptions of some of these organizations.

Women in Black

While Israeli and Palestinian women had formed peace organizations long before 1988,²

¹“The Other Israel” is an Israeli bi-monthly peace newsletter, existing since 1983, and published by its editors Adam Keller & Beate Zilversmidt. See also The Other Israel: Voices of Refusal and Dissent, Roane Carey and Jonathan Shainin, eds. (New York: The New Press, 2002)

²An Arab women’s organization called Women’s Awakening, was formed in 1948, and later

Israeli women formed Women in Black in response to their government's brutal treatment of protesting Palestinian children in the first Intifada. Itzhak Rabin who was then Defense Minister, declared an "Iron Fist" policy of "force, might, the breaking of bones," against young Palestinian stone-throwing protestors, a policy articulated and demonstrated on international TV. In response, a group of Jerusalem women dressed in black held a vigil, demanding an end to the violence (on both sides). They also demanded negotiations, between Israel and the PLO, toward peace.

The initial Jerusalem vigil --a line of women dressed in black, standing for one hour every Friday, holding banners and placards saying "Stop the Occupation" "Stop the Violence" and "Negotiate"-- spread to Tel Aviv, Haifa, and eventually to 24 different locations throughout Israel. Within a few months it spread to the United States, Canada, Europe and Australia. Eventually Women in Black's model of weekly vigils against violence spread to Yugoslavia and "from country to country, wherever women sought to speak out against violence and injustice in their own part of the world."³

In addition to its weekly vigils, Women in Black made solidarity visits to Palestinian villages, brought Palestinian women from the territories to speak with Israeli women, made connections with three of the four main Palestinian women's organizations, and gradually began to understand each other as human beings living in vastly different circumstances. They focused on the connection between war and domestic abuse, and worked with Palestinian women's organizations on annual international conference/demonstrations against the occupation and for peace.⁴

Women in Black has never been explicitly feminist. Its intentionally broad framework welcomed a large range of women: feminist and non-feminist, religious and secular, nonpolitical and of various political stripes. Many women joined because they were fed up with having their sons, lovers, and friends called up repeatedly to patrol the occupied territories because in Israel all men (save the Orthodox) are subject to annual military service from age 18 to 55. Still, a substantial proportion of both membership and leadership are feminists, and many are lesbian-feminists. Early on, in a Women in Black speech, Dalia Sachs, a member of the Haifa branch of Women in Black, quoted Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*: "War is not a woman's profession...."

joined with the Progressive Democratic Organization of Jewish Women around the common goals of "a just peace, in the region and the world, with coexistence between Palestinians and Israelis;...equal rights for women in all areas of life — society, politics, and the work place, [and]...protection of children's rights and ensuring them a future of peace and security." The joint organization is called "TANDI."

³From the Women in Black page on the Coalition of Women for a Just Peace web-site: www.coalitionofwomen.org

⁴Their 1991 "Women's International Conference for Israeli/Palestinian Peace" in Geneva Switzerland, involving 75 women from 13 countries, preceded the first official governmental Israeli/Palestinian Conference (in Madrid) by four months, The Women's International Conference forged a Consensus Document on all the issues, but was ignored by the press and governments. See Gorelick, "Doing the Impossible for Peace."

Bat Shalom

In 1989, a group of Israeli and Palestinian women peace activists met in Brussels for an extended process of dialogue, mutual recognition, and the development of real understanding. Many of the women had already worked together; others had not. It was the opposite of demonization. They formed The Jerusalem Link coordinating two women's organizations: the Israeli Bat Shalom and the Palestinian **Jerusalem Center for Women**, hoping to model peaceful and cooperative co-existence between their two peoples.

Bat Shalom is an Israeli national feminist grassroots organization of Jewish and Palestinian Israeli women working together for a genuine peace grounded in a just resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict, respect for human rights, and an equal voice for Jewish and Arab women within Israeli society. (From their page on the Coalition web-site.)

Women in Black held their vigils week in and week out, for nine years, from the beginning of the First Intifada to the promised peace of the Oslo Accords. And although the inherent flaws of the Oslo Accords were obvious to many of them, they stopped vigiling, only to be brought back to the streets with the second Intifada.

By the year 2000, seven lean years of the Oslo peace Accords had doubled the number of Jewish settlements on Palestinian land in the West Bank and Gaza. Bypass roads for Israeli Jews (only) carved up the territories –the land of the Oslo-promised Palestinian State– into a Swiss cheese of Israeli settlements and bypass roads guarded by more and more Israeli soldiers.⁵ The importation of Russian Jews and foreign workers, and the exclusion of Palestinian laborers from their former jobs within Green-Line Israel,⁶ plunged the Palestinian economic situation into ever more desperation.

With the second Intifada, Women in Black returned to vigiling, and joined Bat Shalom, Tandi, Israeli WILPF,⁷ and other organizations in forming the Coalition of Women for a Just Peace, an umbrella group of “Jewish and Palestinian women (all citizens of Israel),... calling for peace and justice for all inhabitants of the region.” In March 2001 they were joined by Machsom Watch, and later by “The Fifth Mother,”and “New Profile.”

Machsom Watch.

Machsom (or checkpoint) Watch is an organization of women who monitor military and police behavior at checkpoints.

⁵See Gush Shalom maps “Ehud Barak’s Generous Offer” at www.gush-shalom.org/generous/generous/html.

⁶The “Green Line” was the border of Israel before it acquired the Occupied Territories in the 1967 war.

⁷WILPF (The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom- Israel) is the Israeli branch of the international Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), founded in 1915 by suffragist women demanding an end to World War I. WILPF has National Sections in 37 countries, covering all continents of the world.

The Israeli government justifies the checkpoints it has set up throughout Palestine as necessary to protect Israelis against suicide bombers. Most of these checkpoints, however, are not at the borders with Israel, but within Palestinian territories. There young Israeli soldiers have the power to decide whether sick Palestinians can get to a hospital, whether teachers can get to work, whether children can get to school or parents can pick them up. Several Palestinian women have had to give birth on the ground at checkpoints, because a soldier would not let them pass to go to a hospital. Many have died.⁸ Waiting for permission to pass through checkpoints, Palestinians are subject to humiliation, derisive laughter, and physical abuse. An ordinary fifteen minute trip can take hours.

As recently as February 2005, returning from a visit to her native Israel, Illit reported that Palestinians, legal residents of Jerusalem, are blocked from moving from one area to another by the [separation] wall, by roadblocks and checkpoints, and by an intricate system of ID cards, magnetic cards, and permits from authorities. Permits are necessary to obtain jobs, to travel to work, to see relatives, to go to hospitals, to schools. Permits can be taken away at the slightest pretext and then, unable to work or travel one still has to find a way to, without permit, go and pay the inevitable fines, to hopefully receive a new permit⁹.

Two Israeli organizations have responded specifically to the problems at check-points: Btselem, the [gender-mixed] Israeli Human rights organization, and Machsom Watch. Begun by three women in 2001, Machsom Watch now has 400 women who show up at checkpoints throughout the country “to monitor the behavior of soldiers and police; to ensure that the human and civil rights of Palestinians attempting to enter Israel are protected; to record and report the results of [their] observations to the widest possible audience, from the decision-making level to that of the general public.” Mostly made up of “mature professional women,” they attempt to exert a chastening moral influence on militarized young men.

“The Fifth Mother” grew out of an organization called “The Four Mothers, which had helped to end the Israeli occupation of Lebanon.” Proclaiming (in Hebrew, Arabic, and English) that “War is Not My Language,” they emphasize conflict resolution as the alternative to violence. Unlike the other organizations, “The Fifth Mother” has a “motherist” orientation, laying claim to women’s greater peacefulness, as well as mothers’ experience and knowledge of peaceful methods of dealing with conflict. They call for involving conflict resolution experts to break the impasse in negotiations for peace.

They also focus on eradicating military language from public discourse, a concern they share with “New Profile.” The latter organization aims at the demilitarization of Israeli society in education, discourse, and practice.

We support the right to resist the draft, conscientious objection and refusal to serve in the Occupied Territories for all men and women. We work with women whose lives have been damaged by militarization, such as victims of sexual harassment in the military, or of exploitation by the Ministry of Defense.

⁸The Palestinian Human Rights Monitoring Group states that 86 people died at checkpoints between Sept. 2000 and January 2005. See www.phrmg.org for statistics and a detailed list of the individual cases.

⁹Report published on a flyer of Women in Black Union Square, New York City, USA.

“New Profile” is explicitly feminist, yet it is the only organization in the Coalition that explicitly includes feminist men. Unlike the Fifth Mother, Machsom Watch, Tandi and WILPF, which tend to draw older women, “New Profile” focuses primarily on younger people, especially in view of its work with draft resisters, and on de-militarizing school curriculum.

Of Fear and Feminism

Of course these women are afraid. They wonder whether their bus will be blown up by a Palestinian suicide-bomber as they travel to a pacifist meeting. They fear that an Israeli soldier may shoot them as they bring food, medicine, and sanitary napkins to a refugee camp under siege. And they fear that further Israeli military incursions, assassinations and immiseration of the Palestinian people, further refusals to end the occupation of the territories, will prolong the desperate cycle of violence. Rather than being a denial of fear, their political action is based on the conviction that they must deal constructively with those fears, because, as the Coalition of Women for Peace banners say: “The Occupation is Killing Us All.”

Reflections

Everything is always changing and everything stays the same in this interminable conflict. By the time you read this report, the surface of the conflict may change many times, but the challenge is to fundamentally resolve it—to change its underlying structure. The present conjuncture is often discouraging for people who believe in and struggle for a just and humane peace. Israeli and Palestinian peace activists also get discouraged. But they “keep on keeping on,” and so must we.

Perhaps we can take a page from “The Fifth Mother” and New Profile’s attack on military language in the public discourse. A “hawk” is an image that flatters the violent male ego. Sports teams choose these names: “hawks, predators, terminators.” Let us rub the self-delusionary shine off these cartoon images. Change the metaphor for U.S. and Israeli war-promoters from “hawks” to “vultures,” the War-mongers are the vultures, and the peace-mongers the furious doves.

The positive response to our workshop shows that there is a larger constituency for peace than people think, given their (our) invisibility in the media. The task now is to make that constituency evident. Now that the right-wing is wreaking terror on professors who dare to break the long-suffocating silence about Palestinian realities, we must mobilize those who want a humane and just resolution to the conflict to defend the voices for peace in Israel/Palestine

Going Further: a Brief Bibliography and Web-site List

Web-sites: You can keep up to date by checking the following web-sites. Especially important for people in the USA is www.endtheoccupation.org.

In Israel/Palestine:

The Jerusalem Center for Women: www.j-c-w.org

Coalition of Women for [a Just] Peace: www.coalitionofwomen.org

(The following sites are not feminist, but do supply useful information:

The Israeli Peace bloc (“Gush Shalom”) www.gush-shalom.org

The Palestinian Human Rights Monitoring Group www.phrmg.org

The Other Israel online journal: www.theotherisrael.home.igc.org

Books:

Abdo, Nahla and Ronit Lentin. *Women and the Politics of Military Confrontation: Palestinian and Israeli Gendered Narratives of Dislocation*.

Abdo-Zubi, Nahla. *Family, Women and Social Change in the Middle East: The Palestinian Case*. (Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press, 1987).

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